



Contemplating the Stations of the Cross

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Cover art taken from a hand-painted pall depicting

Our Divine Lord on the Cross

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I. JESUS IS CONDEMNED TO DEATH

TWO MEN stand face to face in this **first Station**: Jesus Christ Our Lord, and Pontius Pilate, the Prisoner and His judge. Several times during the course of the trial the judge has borne public testimony to the innocence of the Prisoner. He is an innocent Man, Pilate declared, "therefore" He must be scourged! He is guilty of no crime, therefore let Him be handed over to be made the plaything of brutal soldiery. Let Him be crowned with thorns, spat upon, derided, struck across the face. In the **First Station**, this travesty of justice reaches its climax. Here is Pilate with all the external trappings of justice about him, solemnly pronouncing sentence of death on Jesus Christ, an innocent Man. It will be well to recall briefly the chain of circumstances that led to this singularly illogical mode of procedure.

First, there are Pilate's four distinct warnings. It is clear that, from the start, the irresolute judge realizes he is dealing with no ordinary man in this Prisoner. He had seen the Man's more-than-human patience in the face of galling injustice. He had witnessed a gentleness and a meekness, and even a burning love, for the very men who were hounding Him to death. Where Pilate would have expected indignation, he found only compassion. When he would have looked for a man cringing at his feet and pleading for freedom, he saw a strong, unbending Christ--showing the strength that comes from sinlessness, fearing no man, asking for nothing from any man except justice. This Jesus of Nazareth was no common criminal. The very personality of the Prisoner before him gave Pilate his first warning.

Not content with permitting him to be witness of the divinity of His very bearing, Our Lord spoke to Pilate, gave him every opportunity to ask questions, and showed Himself willing to instruct Pilate in everything he wished to know. "My kingdom is not of this world, though it is true I am indeed a King. You would have no power against Me unless it were given you from above . . . For this I was born, and for this I came into the world that I might give testimony of the truth."

Pilate's third warning came from his own wife. "Have thou nothing to do with that just Man, because I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of Him."

And lastly, even the very enemies of Christ unwillingly warned Pilate. When they came back from Herod, they cried out that the Man should die, "because He made Himself the Son of God." And the gospel narrative adds significantly, "Now, when Pilate heard these words, he feared the more." Four warnings, four signal chances for

Pilate. And the result? "An innocent Man, therefore I will chastise Him. He has done no crime, therefore let Him be crucified!" Strange logic. Can we account for it in any way?

Yes. For there was a counter-attack in Pilate's heart. Grace was, indeed, warning Pilate, but he was a slave to human respect. His motto was to get on well with the world at any cost. This his enemies knew very well. Pilate's position was in danger. He might lose favor with Caesar if he did not take prompt action at the very first suggestion of revolution. It would be their chance to play their trump card. "Pilate, if you let this Man go, you are no friend of Caesar!" This struggle between Christ and the world still raged in his breast, but, "being willing to satisfy the people and fearing lest a tumult might be made," he handed Christ over to them to be crucified, because He was an innocent Man!

The soul of every man is a piece of territory belonging to Our Lord, because it is redeemed by His Blood. And over that territory war is waged--a relentless war between Christ and Satan, Christ and Caesar, Christ and the World. Who shall have the victory? Christ or Caesar? That must be decided by the soul. Christ will not have a service that is forced, and Satan, with all his hatred, cannot compel the human will. Conscience utters words of warning (as conscience warned Pilate), but the soul can refuse to listen. Let a man violate his own conscience, under arguments no matter how unfounded, and, like Pilate, he drives peace far from himself.

II. JESUS IS MADE TO BEAR HIS CROSS

Sanctity is tested, principally, by our attitude towards the Cross and suffering. The reason for this is apparent because sanctity means close following of Christ, and there is no close following of Him without the Cross. "There is no detour around the Hill of Calvary." Now, when we look about the world, we find there are three attitudes towards this stern uncompromising teaching of Christ concerning the Cross and suffering. "The first of these is undisguised rejection of the Cross. In every heart there is a natural liking for what is naturally pleasant, and a natural repugnance for what is naturally unpleasant. Most men acquiesce in this state of things. When to these, a thorn-crowned, bleeding Christ presents Himself and bids them deny their appetites, practice self-control, deliberately choose what naturally they do not like--when Christ lays down a program like this before such worldly-minded men, they look upon Him with blank wonderment and perhaps even with contempt. What use is life if a man has to choose suffering? Their whole gospel is comfort and money and a good time. They fly from pain. For them, suffering in any form is an unmitigated misfortune, a

most unwelcome visitor if it comes to their doorstep--to be dispatched, without ceremony or apology, at the very first opportunity. That is the world's philosophy. The world rejects Christ because of the Cross. "We will not have this Man to reign over us."

There is a second class of people who follow Christ and accept Him, but they do this in spite of the Cross. They will tell you they are resigned to suffering when they know it comes from Him. Since He has seen fit to lay this heavy cross upon us, welcome be His Holy Will! It is clear, of course, that this second attitude is far and away more Christ-like than the first. When a crushing load of suffering is weighing down a man's heart, then to lift up his eyes and say, "Thy Will be done," that surely is proof of the sincerity of the man's love for Christ.

But is there anything higher? Do the saints stop at mere passive resignation to suffering? Does Christ Himself in the **Second Station**? No. Here, there is a third attitude--eager, active acceptance of the Cross. The saints had somehow schooled themselves in the ways of Christ that many of them were known to complain to God that He was forgetting them when He left them without suffering. Those of this third attitude accept Christ and His teaching, not merely in spite of the Cross. They accept Him and His hard sayings, just because of the Cross. That is one of the big lessons of the Second Station. Here Christ accepts the Cross, embraces the Cross, and voluntarily faces a death of excruciating sufferings, not because such a death is strictly necessary, but because He wants us to learn that love proves itself, above all, by willingness to suffer for one's beloved.

Many of the saints went to their own personal Calvary in an ecstasy of happiness. One wonders if there was any such feeling of satisfaction in Our Lord's heart as He walked down the steps of Pilate's Pretorium and made His way through those howling multitudes to take up His Cross and go to Calvary. It is a matter of mere conjecture, but one imagines He might have deliberately excluded all such feelings of joy at that moment. He embraced the Cross indeed, and loved the Cross, but all was done, one thinks, without a particle of natural satisfaction. All through the Passion, He is seeking, of set purpose, for suffering. Is it likely that, at that moment, He allowed Himself a feeling of relief that, in His loving generosity toward others, He also allowed His saints to feel as they set out for their own personal Calvary.

Christ needs saints today. Why is it there are so many good people but comparatively few saints? Is it that these good folks do not say their prayers or frequent the Sacraments? Or that they fall into serious sin sometimes? No. We have few saints because they are very few who take literally the hard lesson of accepting suffering.

As long as we leave this hard lesson in the region of dry theory, we will continue to we loiter on the road that leads to sainthood.

Christ offers us the Cross and we can reject it with disdain. He offers us the Cross and we can take it grudgingly and drag it after us with resignation. Christ offers us the Cross and we can accept it lovingly, knowing His choice is always the best. This is what the saints do. It is what Our Divine Lord is doing in the Second Station.

A friend is always inclined to make excuses for the shortcomings of the one he loves. It is a friend's way to fix his attention on what is best and most lovable in one who is dear to him. If he has to admit faults in his friend, he does so reluctantly. His tendency all this time is to look out for the good in his friend, to judge his friend by what he is when at his best, not by what his friend is when he makes a mistake that shows him to be only common clay after all. If you want to cause pain to that man, dwell at length on the defects of his friend, ridicule his friend, draw the attention of others to the fact that that friend is selfish, or brainless, or ugly, or ill-mannered, and you have driven a knife into the heart of the man to whom he is so dear.

III, VI, IX. JESUS FALLS THE FIRST, SECOND, AND THIRD TIMES

Perhaps one of the most difficult lessons we must learn is that Our Lord is just like that in His way of regarding our shortcomings. It is a difficult lesson because we persist in looking at our faults from our own angle and we refuse to train ourselves to regard them from His angle. In this **Third Station** and again in the **Seventh and Ninth Stations**, Jesus falls on the way to Calvary because He wants us to learn how to use our own faults.

Naturally, our falls are inclined to cause us discouragement. Suppose a soul, deeply penetrated with the utter truth of Our Lord's love for it, resolves to climb bravely up the side of the steep mountain of sanctity. At first everything goes pleasantly. Prayer is a joy, for in prayer the soul meets face to face the Christ it loves. Penance is easy, for does not that generous soul want to make reparation for its own sins and the sins of the world? But eventually, this happy state of things becomes topsy-turvy. A day comes when the Lord hides His Face. Prayer is now most wearisome, nauseating perhaps, and penance bristles with difficulties. The soul seems to itself a foolish idealist. Climbing the mountain of holiness was all very well under the cheering summer sun with the pleasant breeze blowing, the cool springs to drink from, and the song of birds making music under a blue sky. But to go on in the bleakness of winter when the rains are heavy, the snow blinds your eyes and the icy winds make you shiver-

-that is quite another matter. "It's a fool's game," whispers the tempter, "you've been aiming too high. Go back to the snug valleys and have sense. Sanctity is not for you."

Or, take a very different case. A man has been wallowing in sin for years. But somehow--through the prayers of the mother who loves him, or the chance hearing of a sermon, or an off-hand picking up of a good book, or a casual chat with a priest in a railway carriage--somehow the grace of God begins to awaken once more in the man's soul. He yields at last, and leaves his load of sin at the bleeding Feet. As he goes out from that good Confession, his face is radiant. A new happiness, to which he has long been a stranger, fills his heart, and he tells you he is fixed in his determination never to sin again.. But with him, too, the devil will bide his time. Certain is it that he will bring back again to that repentant sinner the remembrance of those past sins. He will deck them out in most alluring colors. "No use trying to be too good. It can't be any harm to let go just this once, especially since you have held out so long now. Have a "good time," just for once, and then you can fix things up again." And the man feels a great longing to yield.

So the saintly soul is tempted and the sinful soul is tempted, each in its own way. Suppose, under stress of temptation like this, we have fallen back into sin or imperfection. Why do we then become discouraged? Because we have hurt a Friend? Not, perhaps, so much for that reason as that our pride is wounded. We thought we were so much stronger. We believed we had will-power enough to stand up to that attack and our fall has proven that we are still so very weak! We can almost work ourselves into a state of irritation with ourselves that we are not better or stronger than we thought! We forget to look at the fall from Our Lord's angle. He is a Friend, and it is a friend's way always to discover the gold in the one he loves. He is only too eager to recall our high ideals and sincere promises. He is only too anxious to make every allowance for the force of that temptation. He longs for one thing--that, like a frightened child, we run back to Him without a moment's delay to tell Him we are ashamed and sorry, and that we are going to start loving Him again more than ever before.

Experiencing our weakness does much to confirm us in humility, the virtue upon which the entire structure of holiness must rest. At the same time our faults kill the roots of pride in us, they pour into our souls a gentleness with others and a readiness to excuse. That self-sufficiency, hard and scornful, is gone and in its place we now have a spirit of kindly forgiveness, the same shown to ourselves by the merciful Christ.

Finally, our falls should cause our hearts to overflow with gratitude to God. When we had gone right over the precipice, He sought us out and brought us back to the security of the fold. If not for His mercy, at this moment we should be in hell!

Christ falls, and He would not have us be surprised or discouraged if we fall, too. Rather He wants us to learn humility and gratitude--humility at the sight of what we were and gratitude at the memory of what, through His understanding love, we have become, in spite of our falls or perhaps because of them.

IV. JESUS MEETS HIS AFFLICTED MOTHER

One thinks Our Lady must have had difficulty in even recognizing her divine Son during His passion. From her place at the corner of the road she stands and looks, as bearing His own cross, He goes forth to that place called Calvary. Is it possible that that bleeding, disfigured Man is He indeed? Even His Mother finds difficulty in recognizing Him! Sin has wrought such havoc in the sinless Christ. He is here, the Victim of sin, and consequently in this **Fourth Station** on the road to Calvary is one of the best places to learn the real nature of sin.

When Mary looks into a soul in the state of sanctifying grace, she at once recognizes that soul as her very own. God's image, the image of Mary's Son, is impressed upon that soul, and Mary is quick to discern the family resemblance. But let mortal sin enter in and ,at once, there is disfigurement. No longer can Mary recognize the soul. That inner temple, in which her Son had set up His abode, is now a den of thieves. There is darkness and loneliness in the soul and a feeling of being utterly forsaken. This follows inevitably after the first thrill of pleasure or excitement caused by the sin. Let me look well at Jesus as Mary looks at Him here, let me look, too, into a soul and see, as she does, the truly appalling change wrought in that soul by mortal sin.

It may appear strange at first sight that Our Lord should cause this keen suffering to His Mother when He might so easily have averted it from her. He was habitually so thoughtful of others. Thus, He had compassion for another broken-hearted mother--the widow of Naim. But for His own Mother, it seems he had nothing but this apparent cruelty! Why has He not, for instance, arranged things so Mary will in Nazareth during these terrible days and know nothing about the Passion until it is over? Why so much compassion for the widow of Naim and such an entire absence of compassion for His own Mother? The answer is serious consideration. He treats Mary this way because He loves her much more than He loved the widow of Naim. Nobody was destined to follow Him as closely as Mary. No one else shared such intimacy with Christ and, therefore, no one else could share in His sufferings.

It would be helpful, if we had space, to show that every single joy that entered Our Lady's life, was balanced by a great sorrow. The Incarnation, the Nativity, the visit of the Magi, the blessing of holy Simeon, the holy familiarity of the Hidden Life--all these were Mary's joys, but everyone was accompanied by a sorrow. Now, sorrow pierces her heart as she looks at her Son, here on the road to Calvary, the Victim of sin. But she does not wince. She prepares to follow Him even to the end, for she must drink to the dregs the chalice of sorrow, just because she is Christ's dearest and most intimate companion and friend.

V. SIMON HELPS JESUS CARRY THE CROSS

Each of the three evangelists who tells us about Simon of Cyrene dwells on the idea that force had to be used to induce him to carry the Cross with Our Blessed Lord. History repeats itself in every soul who tries to follow Christ closely. In every soul there is a craving for happiness and Christ and Satan both promise to satisfy this craving. Briefly, Our Lord's instructions for attaining happiness are, "Use violence (as Simon has to do here), and peace will follow." Satan's advice is diametrically opposed, "Yield," he counsels. "Cease to control yourself. Gratify your passions and then you will taste the happiness you desire." It may be worthwhile dwelling on each set of instructions.

To fulfill this **Fifth Station**, Simon had to use force with himself. Are we to suppose this act passed without its reward? Everything we know about Our Lord confirms us in the belief that, before that journey ended, Simon had experienced a peace to which he had hitherto been an utter stranger. "Take up My yoke . . . and you shall find peace." How often one sees that divine promise fulfilled! You are struggling with a painful and humiliating temptation--be it impurity in its manifold forms or drink, hatred, or bad temper. It is so easy to let go one's hold! The longing steals over one to yield--just this once, and then never again! If the poor soul surrenders, what follows? Peace? No, but sorrow, remorse, and disgust. A little force at first and all would have been well. A standing clear of the occasion of sin--shunning that person or place resolutely--and all this vain regret would have been avoided. It would have been such a joy to be able to look back and say, "Thank God, I held out! The struggle was indeed desperately hard, but now I am tasting the joys of victory." This is the experience of every true follower of Christ. Like Simon, there will be times in our lives when we have to use force but, soon after doing so, our souls are filled with the peace of God that surpasses all understanding.

No man is so holy or zealous that the fascination of temptation never comes into his life. But he trusts the promises of Christ. He knows the temptation will not always be as strong as it is now. His past experience teaches him that sin turns to ashes as soon as it is touched. The struggle is certain to be followed by deep peace--on the one condition that he refuse all parley with the enemy and all verging towards the edge of the precipice.

Satan's followers bear witness to the truth that sin brings only misery. But the pity is that they allow him to continue to dazzle them with a specious good. Why do they not learn that sin and worldliness, though they do indeed bring a violent spasm of enjoyment, still leave the soul unsatisfied and hungry? No sooner is one thrill over than the yearning soul races madly after another. In this way, life speeds past and the soul remains untaught. Old age comes on, the world does not want it any longer, and it has never learned to find its happiness in God. So there sets in a peevishness and dissatisfaction even greater than before and death comes and life is gone. People speak of what the man left, God asks what the man brought, and the poor follower of the world stands before the judgment seat, looks at his hands, and finds them empty. Now he wakes up, but only now, to realize that Satan is a liar. Life is gone, innumerable opportunities are lost, and hands are entirely empty!

Our policy? Simon forced himself to take up the cross. Our soul, as we said in earlier, is a piece of territory belonging to Christ. Nail over that territory this notice, "Trespassers will be prosecuted." Prosecute them relentlessly even though there must be war with yourself, for that war is certain to bring peace. "Take up My yoke . . . and you shall find peace in your souls."

VI. VERONICA WIPES THE FACE OF JESUS

It is easy to imagine Veronica's ecstasy of joy and gratitude when, upon returning home that evening after experiencing this **Sixth Station**, she opened up her veil and found impressed upon it the likeness of the Sacred Countenance. It is easy to picture her spreading her veil onto the table, falling to her knees, and, reverently and prayerfully, contemplating the features of the Great Sufferer. Later that night, as artists love to show, she went to the house of John and shared her treasure with the Mother and other friends of Our Lord--a desolate little group they were, gazing long and lovingly on this image of Him Who was crucified.

Now, when the angels look down upon a soul in grace, they marvel at its beauty, for such a soul is a reflection of God. They look and see, as Veronica and the others looked upon this veil, the likeness of God impressed on that soul. That is why God loves souls.

Just as a great artist will spend days and weeks working at a picture and will not rest satisfied until every finishing touch is given to it, so does God work upon His masterpiece--the soul of man. Indeed, so great is His concern about the soul that, not content with creating it to His own image and likeness, He actually makes it His dwelling place. It is a temple of the living God. This sight of a soul constitutes the wonder of the angels as they contemplate the works occurring in that soul through the presence of God's grace. In view of this, it is no wonder that the saints shudder at the remembrance of sin. Mortal sin shatters this beautiful image and expels God from His temple. Blinded by passion, man has had the insolence to sever the tie of love that bound his soul to God. The temple is in darkness. The stately edifice is a smoking ruin. The angels look down and see the havoc wrought. God's masterpiece has been desecrated. The light of His Presence no longer gladdens the halls of that temple. It is the day of the angels' grief.

Meanwhile, what are the sentiments of the poor sinner? Our Lord shows him to us---the Prodigal Son in the pigsty trying to stave off the pangs of hunger with the husks of swine. It is only now, after passion has swept him off his feet, after he has tasted sin and found it to be poison, that the poor soul begins to think straight. There are three distinct stages in his train of thought.

First, he thinks of the utter misery to which sin has reduced him. "I am perishing with hunger!" The thrill of recklessness has spent itself, and there follows this inevitable remorse. "It is an evil and a bitter thing for thee to have left the Lord thy God." How could it be otherwise? Sin banishes God from the soul. A sense of being forsaken must follow "I am perishing with hunger!"

Second, the sinner begins to compare his present misery with his former happiness. "How many hired servants in my father's house abound with bread!" What peace is in a man's life until sin raises its ugly head! All the anxiety it brings! All the torture of conscience! Dissatisfaction with everyone and everything! No power of concentration. He realizes he used to be so happy, so easy to satisfy, so ready to lend a helping hand. Sin has brought about a sad change indeed since those happy days that used to be sinless.

Every sinner feels those two sentiments of the Prodigal--disappointment and regret.

Next, many a sinner makes a fatal mistake at the third stage. At this stage it is the devil's business to make the sinner believe that his case is hopeless; and he may as well settle down to the inevitable. That is the one fatal, irremediable attitude. The Prodigal drew the correct conclusion: "Everything has gone wrong: therefore, I will arise and go

back to my father." Well said! At the first sign of repentance the loving father rushes out to embrace the repentant son. At once the image is restored in all its beauty. At once the temple is rebuilt in the soul, for the divine Architect is not hampered by laws of space and time. Once more the angels look down, and this is the day of their rejoicing. "So I say to you that there shall be joy before the angels of God upon one sinner doing penance."

Sickness or pain often makes us very exacting. When we are ill, in mental anxiety, or pressed down by some unexpected disappointment, we consider ourselves quite justified in looking for special consideration from our friends. We tend to become resentful if they do not listen carefully to lengthy accounts of our troubles, if they do not apply or suggest remedies, or if they leave us after a short visit, when we want them to stay longer. One idea looms large before our minds--because we are undergoing this trial, others must bear with us, must give us every liberty to complain, to be irritable, to air our grievances--real or imaginary. A throbbing brain, an aching wound, or a bad headache or toothache entitles us fully, we maintain, to indulge in our desire for notice and special sympathy.

There is another way of reacting at such a time. One has seen it often--a marvelous gentleness and thoughtfulness for others, exercised in the midst of great personal sorrow or trial. Unselfishness, beautiful and to be admired at all times, never shines out with brighter luster than when shown during one's own suffering. One sees it in the saints and one realizes they have learned the art of unselfishness from Christ in His Passion.

VIII. JESUS SPEAKS TO THE DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM

If anybody might be excused for becoming "wrapped up" in His sufferings, it surely is this bleeding Christ--scourged, crowned with thorns, bearing His own Cross. What do we actually find? Throughout these torments He is preoccupied, not with Himself, but with others. We have space for only a few illustrations. Last night, down in the garden, He spoke to His enemies, "You seek Jesus? I am He. If therefore you seek Me, let these go their way." He will gladly face whatever they have prepared for Him, but He must not compromise His friends--"let these go their way." Here in this **Eighth Station** is the same thoughtfulness. "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not over Me, but over yourselves and your children." He is always thinking of somebody else, even in the midst of excruciating tortures. Follow Him to Calvary, and the same beautiful thoughtfulness lights up the gloom of that death chamber. Even His enemies

unknowingly pay tribute to it. "He saved others, Himself He cannot save." His answer, that marvelous prayer for mercy, shows Christ again full of concern for others. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." "Now, there stood by the Cross of Jesus His Mother." He thinks of her, too, and the sword that is plunged deep into her soul. He must make the best provision He can for her. Beside her is standing the pure-souled John. "Behold thy Mother. Behold thy son." Unselfish and thoughtful for others all through the Passion, one of His last acts is to absolve a repentant sinner. "Amen I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise." Jesus is always thinking of somebody else.

The contrast between Him and ourselves! Consider our forgetfulness of others and preoccupation with ourselves when we suffer pinpricks. Then consider His utter self-forgetfulness and thoughtfulness for others when he is crowned, scourged, and crucified! Compare His silence about His own pains and our readiness to speak of ours! In a word, He showed utter unselfishness and we show utter selfishness! This is one of the many lessons of this **Eighth Station**.

This self-forgetfulness is an infallible rule for happiness. We complain and our very complaints make us more irritable. Let me lay myself out deliberately to make others happy and I will happily discover it is impossible to keep happiness out of my own life. If, when nature bids me to become self-centered, I deliberately train myself to think of the needs and trials of others (especially those I do not like), I have mastered the lesson of the **Eighth Station**. It is a lesson to be learned slowly, but it is certain that every page turned in the volume and every new chapter understood in the lesson of unselfishness will prove to be an advance in the ways of lasting happiness.

Our Lord told His Apostles they were to regard themselves in the world as "lambs in the midst of wolves." That phrase certainly applies to the divine Lamb of God Himself in the Sacred Passion.

X. JESUS IS STRIPPED OF HIS GARMENTS

Here in this **Tenth Station** they surround Him, like ravening wolves howling for their prey, ready to tear Him to pieces, their eyes glistening with an unholy eagerness as they look forward to this slaughter. This is all the more marked because of the contrast between their ruthlessness and the self-composure of the Lamb, His marvelous patience, and His willingness to allow them to strip Him and to offer Him up as Victim of their rage. The brutality of these wolves and the self-possession of the Lamb, who has fallen into their clutches -- let us see how these two thoughts might help us understand the **Tenth Station**.

The wolves are but the instruments of sin, and sin always brutalizes. Sometimes the sinner's very appearance changes. Sadly, you can read in his face the beastliness of the life he is leading. The creature who, having deadened his own conscience, tricks innocence into the ways of vice, knows very well that he is a brute. The creature who is content to wallow in the gutter of a drunkard's existence lowers himself to the level of a brute. Even in such a degraded life there will come moments when conscience will assert itself and the sinner will be smitten with shame. Despite all his fine arguments defending his sin, he is perfectly aware that in reality he is a fallen star, destined indeed to shine in God's firmament, but, fallen now from that high eminence, he seems likely to be besmirched and extinguished and finally buried forever in the depths of the cesspool of sin. Sin brutalizes indeed, and we see it in this Station.

In sharp contrast with the brutality of these men there shines forth the beautiful self-possession of Our Lord. A single gesture of anger or impatience on His part, however excusable it might be, would mar the loveliness of the events of the great drama! That wonderful patience of His is due, in the first place, to the fact that all His suffering is voluntary. For reasons we have seen, the Father wills the Son to suffer, and the Son's Will is absolutely one with the Will of the Father. Let me look into the Sacred Heart and see there, stamped indelibly, the three words: Fiat Voluntas Tua! So His patience throughout is accounted for, first of all, by His love for the Father.

It is accounted for, too, by His love for us. Typically, when a man is deeply immersed in some subject he is liable to become forgetful of many of the ordinary needs and conventions of life. A keen student will often forget to take his food; a soldier in the heat of the fight will not give in to the wound he has received; an author will stare at his watch in amazement when he discovers that he has sat at his desk until long after midnight. Now, it is indeed true that Our Lord was vividly conscious of every pain and insult in the Passion, but it is also true that He was occupied throughout with an even more absorbing task. His task was to change the men who surrounded Him at that time and to further affect those for whom they would stand in subsequent ages. Annas, Caiphas, Pilate, and Herod had all been brutalized by sin. Satan had entered into them and Christ's Passion was intended to be a mighty exorcism. Annas and Caiphas, prototypes of the corruptors of innocence, had to be "Christified." The corrupting influence had to be destroyed and Christ's love enthroned in its place. Christ longed to change Judas, a lover of money and the world, but Judas erected strong barriers against the tidal wave of Christ's mercy. If only a realization of the Passion seized hold of Pilate, a slave to human respect, and Herod, a creature of the gutter. Then, the change Christ longed to achieve must surely follow.

The divine Exorcist is still anxious to complete His task, for Annas and Caiphas, Judas Iscariot, Pilate, Herod, and the rest still live and still thirst for His blood. If we might coin words, Our divine Lord's task is to "de-Herodize" men--to exorcise them of the spirit of impurity. Or to "de-Pilatize" them--to drive far from men's souls the base insincerity and hypocrisy of the world. Or to "de-Judasize" them--to expel from their hearts the passion of avarice. Or to "de-Annasize" or Caiphasize" them--to destroy in them the contagion that corrupts others and leads them into sin.

Holy Church enjoins fasting and prayer on her priests before she permits them to exercise the office of exorcist. What physical and mental pain the divine Exorcist had to pay for the exercise of His office! Nevertheless, man, endowed with free will, can nullify the effect of the Passion in himself. He can prefer to remain a Judas or a Caiphas or a Pilate or a Herod.

He can sit down at the banquet-table of angels or he can crawl with the swine. Omnipotence taxes its powers to exorcise him, but he must give his free co-operation with grace. When he does, Judas is driven forth, or Pilate or Herod or Annas, or Caiphas. Then Christ enters into him. Then his soul becomes a temple. Then, the den of thieves is a tabernacle. Then, Christ's task is done, the exorcism is complete.

XI. JESUS IS NAILED TO THE CROSS

In his book of "Spiritual Exercises," Saint Ignatius speaks of three kinds of humility, and Saint Paul, summarizing the entire history of the Passion, writes that Our Lord "humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the Cross." There is a link between the doctrine of these two great lovers of Christ that may suitably form ideas for consideration of the Eleventh Station. We have first to explain what Saint Ignatius means by the third kind or "degree" of humility. In general, humility is the virtue that makes me subject myself to God, and the "third degree" is the highest form of this subjection. Suppose two courses of action are open to me--one of them pleasant to my natural taste and the other unpleasant, but neither of them sinful. If I choose the pleasant one, God will receive a certain amount of glory by my action. If I choose the unpleasant one, He will receive, in the hypothesis of Saint Ignatius, not a greater glory, but the very same He would have received had I chosen the pleasant course. If I am established in this third degree of humility, my habitual bias will be towards the harder course, and I shall habitually choose it, unless I am convinced that the more pleasant course would give God greater glory than the unpleasant one. The worldly man, faced with something hard, says, "Why should I take this?" His natural reaction is to escape from it and look for arguments against it. For a

disciple of Christ, the mere fact that a thing is unpleasant is at once a powerful argument in its favor. The true disciple's reaction is, "Why should I not take it?" He demands arguments to prove that he should not have it; not, as the naturally-minded man demands, arguments to prove why he should have it. There is a whole world of difference between the two frames of mind.

The motive underlying the philosophy of the Third Degree stares me in the face when I see Christ in this **Eleventh Station** extending His limbs for crucifixion. "He humbled Himself becoming obedient unto death." He chose suffering, the hard thing, when it was not necessary. That fact is a sufficient and super-abundant motive for His disciple to prefer what is hard also.

Thus, in great trials and when dealing with petty annoyances, "This mentality teaches me to see in that shape of His hand outstretched caressingly." Great trials--the death of a dear friend or relative; a lingering illness; a disagreeable and difficult member in the family; an unhappy marriage; failure to pass an examination upon which much depends. Petty annoyances--a fidgety person beside me in Church; an uncomfortable seat in the bus; a mislaid pen or latchkey; the silly story told against me; that cut I gave myself when shaving! Nothing is too small to offer to God.

In view of all the sin that is rife in the world, there is a crying need for saints--not merely pious folk, but men and women fired with zeal for Jesus Christ and souls. Saint Paul points in this Station to the Model of all sanctity. "He humbled Himself."

He deliberately chose what was hard, although He might have given the same glory to His heavenly Father by saving the world without such cost to Himself. Everyone aiming at sanctity must do likewise, and, in his teaching about the Third Degree, Saint Ignatius shows us how to do it and why.

The life of Our divine Lord, judged by the world's standards, is a complete failure, and, in His death on Calvary, that life of failure reaches its climax. He had travelled around doing good, healing all manner of diseases, and now those who benefitted most by His kindness have become His bitterest enemies. He had preached the Kingdom of Heaven with a divine forcefulness and eloquence, but His pupils remained hard of heart and dull of intellect. He gathered a few friends around Him--men whom He taught and trained with very special care--but in His hour of direst need they all ran away from Him even though only a short while ago they swore they were ready to die for Him. If His friends are a cause of failure, His enemies are triumphant on Calvary. Annas and Caiphas stand here before the dying Christ and point the finger of scorn at Him, "Vah, Thou that destroyed the temple of God and in three days dost rebuild it!"

Come down from the Cross!" I seemed apparent to them that He was not able to come down. He was only a dreamer of dreams after all.

But He had not yet drained the chalice of failure. All through His life, in times of obstinacy and contradiction on the part of His enemies or in times of isolation from His friends, Jesus had always one unfailing source of comfort. It was His knowledge of and companionship with His Father. Often, in the stillness of the night, you could meet Him, making His way up the slope of a mountain, and there He would kneel in prayer with His Father. There in prayer He would pour out the love of His Sacred Heart for the Father. There He would speak to the Father of the burning desire He had for the Father's glory. There He would plead with the Father to pour out abundant graces on men's souls. But now, on this day at Calvary, even that one bit of support is taken away from Him. This is bitterness indeed, that the Father should withdraw His protecting hand and permit the mob and the soldiery to vent their rage against His divine Son. This is the culmination of failure and, out of the darkness that surrounds Him, Our Lord sends forth the piteous cry, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

It is worthy to note that same failure is reproduced in Christ's mystical body, the Church. How many times in nineteen centuries her enemies have told the world that she was dead! Like Annas and Caiphas, they pointed to her in derision in what seemed to be her dying hour. They seduced her own children to betray her, even as Judas was seduced. They scourged her and crowned her with thorns. They nailed her to a cross, and even drove the spear into her side. They came down from Calvary sounding the trumpet over her, and proclaiming that at last she was dead.

That has been her history for nineteen centuries. In our own day, men's pride has reached its high-water mark, for today men are marching in millions across the world with the avowed purpose of exterminating God. Religion is the opium of the people. Therefore, crush religion wherever it is found. Crush God. Wade, if necessary, knee-deep in blood and carnage, provided all knowledge and love of Jesus of Nazareth be driven out of men's lives. The Catholic Church is a failure? For nineteen centuries men have been wrapped about in a fog of superstition, and it has been reserved for the high-priests of modern atheism to lead them out into the full light of day!

Like her divine Founder, the church is on the Cross. Perhaps, like Him, too, she may be inclined to call out through the darkness, and ask if even God has forsaken her. Even then, she looks with calm assurance on her enemies. Over Calvary there broke a ray of light when the clouds parted and the Christ Who had been a failure rose triumphant and entered His Father's kingdom. The church too, is following Him there so she, too, is

certain of ultimate success--that assurance never for a moment falters in her breast. Why do her enemies not realize that her survival in spite of the fierce persecution of all these centuries is a most cogent argument for her divinity? Could any mere human institution have survived what she has survived?

The "failure" of Christ and of His Church is a source of solid comfort to a man when he is inclined to be depressed at the sight of his own failures. The sight of Christ drives home the truth that what He wants is not success, but one's best. He regards not what we achieve but what we become. In the process of becoming Christlike, we may, perhaps, have to change our ideas about failure and success. It was at the very moment that the world was proclaiming Him a failure that Our Lord was mounting to the pinnacle of success. For Calvary, indeed, is the triumph of failure.

In the hour of His "failure," Jesus is suffering and He is praying. By prayer and suffering the earnest soul can become "Christified." In the eyes of men, a Christlike life may seem a failure, may seem to achieve little or nothing. On a life of prayer and of suffering lovingly borne Jesus looks and pronounces it blessed. There is no greater success than His benediction.

Many "hard sayings" fell from the lips of Our Savior as we followed Him up here to Calvary. Human nature, He showed us, must be transformed by grace. Thus, what is repellent to us by nature, little by little becomes an object of love. Poor frail human nature is much inclined to tremble before the stern, uncompromising program, and, like the Jews of old, to complain, "This saying is hard and who can hear it?" But there is the comforting side, too.

XII. JESUS DIES ON THE CROSS

In the life of Jesus, Who is now lying dead in Mary's arms at the **Twelfth Station**, there are two phases. The first phase began thirty years ago, when He crept into His world amidst the snow and cold of Bethlehem. The second phase begins here on Calvary and will go on throughout eternity. During all those years of the first phase, He had suffering, humiliations, poverty, ingratitude--things so difficult for human nature. But now the first phase is over, and already He is entering upon the joys of Paradise. Calvary is the beginning, not the end, after all.

When the poor soul, wearied from suffering and purified by humiliation, at last drags itself to Calvary, it must be unburdened of its cross. It must lie down and be crucified, it must, like Jesus, die on the cross. Then, it completes the first phase of the life of the great Model. No sooner does it die than the clouds break, the light streams down on its astonished gaze, and it sees the ravishing delights of heaven! The promises of Christ

fulfilled! For that soul, the second phase too, begins. For it too, that second phase will be without end. "How sweet it is to die," exclaims the saintly Curé of Ars, after one has lived upon the cross!" And perhaps we may be permitted to add, "How sweet it is to live after one has died upon the cross!"

For, if we have been faithful in the work of reproducing the suffering phase of His life, we shall now enter upon the second phase. That means, He tells us, He will say to us on the shore of eternity, "Well done, good and faithful servant . . . enter into the joy of thy Lord . . . Possess the kingdom." "Enter into" the joy. We shall see Him face to face--no longer through a glass darkly. We shall know Him, and, by necessary consequence, we shall love Him. But He is infinitely knowable, so all eternity will not be long enough to know all there is to be known. And love will increase as knowledge increases. Hence, an eternally-increasing, knowledge-begetting, and eternally-increasing love is what Our Lord promises when He bids the soul "enter into the joy of its Lord." But there is more! "Possess" the kingdom! This is a word implying a gilt-edged guarantee of security. Once we enter into the second phase of Christ's life, once we have saved our soul, nothing by any possible combination of circumstances can endanger, even by a hair's breadth, the security of our possession. We have no such guarantee here on earth. Today we may be wealthy and tomorrow paupers. Today we may enjoy splendid health, and tomorrow we may be racked with pain. Friends and family unite lovingly around us today, and tomorrow death or disgrace may separate us. But, all that is changed the moment we enter heaven. Just as one of the most appalling miseries of hell is the absolute certainty that there never can be a moment's respite, one of the thrilling joys of heaven is the absolute certainty that no person can ever wrest this treasure from us, no circumstance could ever possibly arise that could endanger our possession.

No doubt, when the cross presses upon us, it is not always easy to find comfort in the thought of a heaven that, at that moment, seems so distant. For all that, heaven is no fairy-tale. When the first phase is ended, the torch of faith will be extinguished and, with the light of glory, we shall look upon Him Whose hand we have held so trustfully all through the dark night. The first glimpse of that Vision Beatific will flood our hearts with a love ineffable. It was worthwhile toiling through the dark night to come at the end to a dawn like that.

XIII. JESUS IS TAKEN DOWN FROM THE CROSS

Does Our Blessed Lady show much external sign of the anguish that consumes her as she watches her divine Son being taken from the cross at the **Thirteenth Station?** Artists

have depicted her swooning away, her veil blows wildly about her, her arms extended in grief. But we are told that she "stood" by the Cross of Jesus, a word that seems to argue somewhat against the imaginings of poets and artists. One could imagine the truth is that Mary's grief was far too deep for any such external demonstration.

XIV. JESUS IS PLACED IN THE SEPULCHER

In our lives, many of us have seen a mother standing at the graveside of her child. If you were to judge by external signs you would say she was listless and cold, for she is dry eyed and apparently indifferent to the child's death. The truth is, sorrow is eating her heart out. If only she could weep she would have an outlet and relief, but the grief is pent-up and the tears will not come. This type of sorrow filled the soul of Mary as she walked home with John and Magdalene after placing her divine Son's body in the sepulcher at this **Fourteenth Station**.

If we might reverently inquire into the thoughts that were occupying her mind, we would surmise that Mary realized from what she has seen on Calvary, that there is one evil, only one, and sin is its name. Sin murdered her Son that day. She saw there was one happiness in the world--accepting suffering from the motive of love. She considered that there is only one hope for mankind as we make our way through the darkness of Calvary. That hope is unshaken confidence in the promises of her divine Son. In spite of weariness and disgust, mankind carries on, for we are waiting for that promise, of all promises the most wonderful,

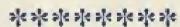
"If the grain of wheat die . . . it will bring forth much fruit."

All along the road mankind is straining for the welcome home, "Enter into the joy of the Lord . . . possess the kingdom."

Lastly, Our Lady knew that, if her children are to attain the fulfillment of this promise, they must be in companionship with her. By her side walked John and Magdalene--John whose lily-white soul never lost its purity and Magdalene who fell into the mire, but was lifted up by God's grace. Purity is the indispensable condition for companionship with Mary. It may be that, through God's mercy, we can walk with her on the side of John. That will be our place if we have never lost our baptismal innocence. But, even if we have, we can walk with Magdalene in the way of reparation and penance, for Magdalene, too, is an inseparable companion of the immaculate Mary.

These are the truths that came to Our blessed Lady on her journey to Calvary. These are the truths her Son taught us as we walked and contemplated the Stations. These truths and the philosophy they contain sound like utter nonsense to many.

Can we apply any test to discover the practical value of Christ's philosophy of life? There is, indeed, a test--the test of experience. Men are found to order their lives by the principles of Christ, and it is their universal experience and their most emphatic assertion that His promises do indeed stand the test. "Take up My yoke and you shall find peace to your souls."





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